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AUTHOR Fagan, William T.
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ABSTRACT

Family literacy programs, of which there is no shortage, need to be examined to know "if" and "why" a program is successful. Family literacy programs, like any literacy programs, must be viewed from a critical reflective stance. This paper aims to describe one way of evaluating the effectiveness of family literacy programs. The paper contends that the two main components in understanding a family literacy program are content/format and participants--both of these suggest that a program is more than the sum of its parts. It explains that the program which formed the basis of a study is the PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support) Program, initiated by the author/researcher to meet a perceived gap between homes and schools in terms of parents supporting the literacy development of their young children. The paper describes the PRINTS Program; and to determine the transfer of effect across participants, a sample of 80 parents was chosen from those parents who had participated in the PRINTS Program. The paper states that to determine how the learning of one cohort group at one link of the chain affected the learning of the group following, a methodology labeled reverse learning effects was used. Because of the magnitude of the study, the paper reports only data on the parents' evaluations of the program. It concludes that family literacy programs are not just about one group of participants--they are about all the participants who are involved at different points along the chain of learning. (NKA)

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Family Literacy Programs: The Whole is More than the Sum of its Parts

Shortened Version of Paper Presented at the 12th European Conference on Reading

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William T. Fagan

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Faculty of Education

Box 194

St. John's, NF, Canada A1B 3X8

Phone: 709-895-2022

FAX: 709-895-2957

e-mail: wfagan@mun.ca

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There is no shortage of family literacy programs. In fact implementing family literacy programs may be leading to an overlapping situation in which one program replaces another that is very similar in content. A new title suggests a new program and stakeholders tend to access the newest title on the market, which does not always mean a new type of program from the last one they implemented. In fact, one program often replaces another that is very similar in format and content. We need to know IF and WHY a family literacy program is successful. Family literacy programs, like any literacy programs, must be viewed from a critical reflective stance. The purpose of this paper is to describe one way of evaluating the effectiveness of family literacy programs.

A Plan for Reflecting on Family Literacy Programs

When we think of a successful family literacy program, what do we think of? Do we think of children and their demonstration, in some way, that they have learned pertinent literacy information? Do we think of what they have learned (the program content)? Do we think of the parents and guardians who have facilitated and nurtured their children in developing a literacy foundation? Do we think of what parents know and do to provide successful literacy experiences for the children? Do we think of the format in which the parents and guardians learned how to work with their children and the role that facilitators played in empowering parents? Do we think of how the facilitators acquired the necessary expertise to provide workshop sessions for parents?

The two main components in understanding a family literacy program are content/format and participants. Both of these suggest that a program is more than the sum of its parts. Content is not bits and pieces but must be interwoven in some way into an integrated whole. Likewise, participants include a range of people: the child, the parent, the facilitator of the parent, and the author/source which provided the necessary expertise for the facilitator. Evaluating the success of a family literacy program must take into account each of these components.

Content and Format

The program which formed the basis of this study is the PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support) Program. This was initiated by the author in order to meet a perceived gap between homes and schools in terms of parents supporting the literacy development of their young children.

Thomas and Skage (1998) point out that program content is important because it provides a definition of family literacy, which they conclude is a "daunting task" which "may be compared to trying to capture a wide landscape with a single camera shot" (p. 5). PRINTS is a very bold program in this regard for it attempts to provide the widest lens in including experiences that may foster early literacy development. The overall goal is to empower parents as supporters of their young children's literacy development. The age range to which it is directed is pre-age 1 to age 6. However, parents who have children as old as grade 3 and who experience difficulty in reading and writing maintain it is suitable for children to that age. PRINTS (Parents' Roles Interacting with Teacher Support) (Fagan, & Cronin, 1997) is based on a model that was developed by Hannon and Nutbrown (1996). It is comprehensive or holistic in nature and is based around five STEPS or contexts in which parents can take advantage of literacy opportunities to foster their children's literacy development: talk/oral language, play, books and book sharing, environmental print, and scribbling, drawing, writing. Within each of these STEPS, a parent/caregiver may take five ROLES: providing opportunity for sharing with children, providing recognition or positive feedback, interacting in effective ways, modelling literacy, and setting guidelines. Parent input helps the facilitator develop the concepts or meaning for each STEP. The parents may learn 40 activities across the different STEPS, many of them through hands-on or direct learning. These activities cover a wide range of social and cognitive skills - from exposing children to nursery rhymes and rhythm, to providing a structure

for storytelling, to observing literacy in action, to modelling concepts, to providing support for writing.

Materials for implementing the program include a Facilitator's Handbook and a parent video which demonstrates parents and children engaged in some of the activities. There is a Parent Manual which provides the basics of how to implement the different activities. This was requested by parents but is optional and would not be used if parents were low-literate. Since the program is based on hands-on learning, it is suitable for low-literate parents. Facilitators are usually trained in a 5-6 hour workshop by an author of the program or designate. A training video and manual are also available Facilitators provide training for parents over a minimum 12 week period with two-hour sessions per week. The first and last sessions are introductory and wrap-up, while the additional ten sessions consist of two sessions for each STEP. It is recommended (optional) that parents take a week's break after each STEP (every two sessions, beginning with the third), in order to have more time for implementing the program. This would mean five additional weeks for an overall time of 17 weeks that the program is in progress between facilitators and parents.

The program is structured yet flexible. There is a set format for each session but there is provision for parent input. Parents help develop the key concept underlying each step; they share literacy experiences of their children. They have opportunities to discuss how activities may be best implemented with their children and may suggest modifications in light of their children's age and maturity. There is time for input and checkpoints on one's learning. The program was first developed for low-income parents and many of the activities are cost-effective, being constructed from bristol board, sales flyers, magazines, and newspapers. At the start of the program parents are given a kit of items such as glue, crayons, scissors, etc. At the end of each session a small child's book is given each parent for the child. The training sessions are conducted with the parents, who in turn engage their children in the literacy activities and practices with

which they become familiar. Support for the program/content is provided by the responses of parents and reported below.

Transfer of Learning

The second component in family literacy programs that must be considered in determining their success includes the various participants. The impact of a parent interacting with a child in various activities cannot be isolated from the training which the parent received from a family literacy facilitator or the knowledge which the facilitator had acquired about the program. Transfer of learning across different participants can be likened to a chain, and in the case of old adage about chains, the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Therefore, if by chance, parents had received less than adequate preparation in how to best facilitate literacy activities with their children, then it is unlikely they would provide their children with the best literacy development experiences.

In order to determine the transfer effect across participants, a sample of 80 parents were chosen from those parents who had participated in the PRINTS Program. These were chosen to represent both urban and rural communities and across a wide geographic area. When parents had more than one pre-school child, the child closest to the age of beginning school at the time the parents participated in the program, was considered the target child. The target parents had attended programs at 15 sites with 11 facilitators, which means that some facilitators may have facilitated the program at more than one site. However, it was more likely that a facilitator facilitated the program more than one year at the same site. The time line covered six years, from the pilot phase of the family literacy program until the data were collected. Because of this time line, it was also possible to study the knowledge of children who had entered school.

Methodology

In order to determine how the learning of one cohort group at one link of the chain affected the learning of the group following, a methodology labelled reverse learning effects was used. This meant that the children were assessed on various observational, self-reporting attitudinal scales, and literacy tasks. Scores were arranged hierarchically and the top and the bottom quartiles were chosen for further investigation. The parents of these children could easily be identified as well as the facilitators who had provided the training for these parents. It was also possible to determine how the facilitators had acquired their knowledge of the program. Data from the adult participants were gathered through observation, checklists, questionnaires, and interviews.

Because of the magnitude of the study, only data on the parents are reported here. The interview responses of the parents were first divided into idea units which were then grouped by categories that were suggested by the information. Each of the categories differentiated parents from the top and bottom quartiles on at least a 80-20 basis. That is, at least 80 percent of the positive and supportive responses within a category were provided by parents of children in the top quartile. In addition, all of these parents contributed positive and supportive responses across all categories. This behaviour did not characterize parents of children in the bottom quartile who rarely gave positive and supportive responses beyond three categories.

Response Categories

The categories of the parents' responses are described below.

Category 1: Experiencing a Change in Attitude/ Insight. Parents realized that either their insights and attitudes towards early literacy development had changed, or had been reinforced, and they knew what they knew about fostering early literacy development. For some parents, it was an "eye-opener"; they had just never thought in this way, but once introduced to information and possibilities, they immediately saw that it made sense, that it was "common sense". Some couldn't believe that they had not "figured this out" on their own. The single biggest impact was that parents became aware that children were never too young to engage in learning activities. Many parents had been under the impression that age 4 was too young to engage children in literacy learning activities, even in a fun or play like manner. They became aware that a lot of learning can occur in fun and play activities. "Children learn more quickly and learn more if they enjoy what they do." "I had bought these alphabet cards and tried to teach Karla the letters. But she wouldn't pay attention. Then when I made the Alphabet House (A PRINTS activity), all she wanted was to learn her letters - and she did."

They learned the importance of being active and not passive in interacting with children - "learning is not just parents telling and pointing. It is important that both child and parent get involved, not just the child". Many of the parents used the concepts of reading TO and WITH children which had been an important part in talking about reading during the training sessions. They learned how important it was not to push children but "to be patient and let the child take the lead". Through the evaluation

activities in the PRINTS Program they became aware of the kinds of learning in which children could engage and were impressed with the level of knowledge children possessed or developed about literacy. They became more observant of what children did, for example turning the pages of a book in the right direction. Comments to illustrate parents' awareness of knowledge/insight/ attitude are:

- "When I recognized that this was an on-going part of my and my child's life and not just another project for a short time, I knew things would never be the same".
- "I knew that giving my child the necessary learning in literacy was special from other things and I made it a special time for my child and me".
- "You discover it works. You know you are doing something different because my daughter is learning much faster than my other children did at her age".
- "Sometimes I did things and felt they were right. But knowing the reasons why the activities are helpful for my child - made them a lot more meaningful for me".
- "I really understood that teaching can be packaged in so many different ways. A problem in school is that there is often only one way that teaching is packaged and some children may not be able to fit that package".
- "I really knew that I understood the activity. No one could fool me on how to do it. I knew I was doing it the right way and my child was the one who would benefit."

Category 2: Awareness of Conditions for Use. Many of the school-driven family literacy programs consist of the school sending home books to be read which are then accounted for by keeping a tally of some sort. Parents often see this as "something to get done" and try and do it as soon as they can, or wait until the last minute and are then reminded by the child who is aware of the deadline for getting information back to the teacher. Influenced by the PRINTS Program, parents came to realize that "all times are learning times". What they did was not driven by the expectations of someone else, nor

their being required to report to someone else, but on their understanding that sharing and interaction times were good for the child and depending on the activity, there were a variety of venues in which learning could take place. Perhaps, the most cognizant statement exemplifying this from one parent was, "I never realized that outside my door was a learning field." Parents talked about such activities as putting a carton/tin on the counter that may be used as part of supper and using this as a learning experience for recognizing labels, or walking down the street with their child and talking about the print on the bus stop or other display, or of playing a guessing game such as "I Spy" or reciting a nursery rhyme as they rode on the bus. The child's life's space became the focus for learning, not a particular activity, such as reading a book or playing a word game. The latter took their meaning from the former and not vice versa.

Sample comments illustrating Category 2 are:

- "It is so easy to concentrate when you and your child are working at home."
- "I don't think anymore like I must remember to read with my child or whatever; I just fill in our time with whatever seems the most useful. Sometimes we'll just start a game and I have to do something else, but at least we get started and often my child just works or plays along on her own."
- "It's nice to feel that anytime is a good time. You can choose what you want to do when and you can go at your pace."
- "There is really no getting ready anymore. Of course we must have materials for games and that. But it could be at the kitchen table, at the coffee table, on the floor, or in the back garden."
- "What it does is always keep literacy on your mind. You must be always looking for ways to involve your child. After awhile the child starts to find times and you just go along with that."

Category 3: Developing a Sense of Ownership. Much has been written about participants having a sense of ownership of the activities they participate in. Developing a sense of ownership is always not that easy, however. It involves a willingness and opportunity on the part of the initial owner to transfer that responsibility, and a willingness on the part of participants to accept it. The PRINTS Program fostered a sense of ownership in four ways. The parents were involved in developing the concepts for the five Steps; they were given time to share what was happening in their and their children's "literacy" lives; they engaged in discussion on how activities might be modified for children of various ages and maturity levels; and they decided what activities they would engage in with their children, and when. Parents also knew that they could add activities that they were/became aware of from other sources.

Ownership is often used synonymously with such terms as "possession" and "control". But it was not these concepts that conceptualized this behaviour as explained by parents. There was a sense of respect for oneself and a respect of others for them. In other words, the parents were trusted; they were not told what to do and were not accountable to others for doing it. This, of course, led to positive self-concept development, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Allied to this was a feeling of independence. When you are trusted, respected, feel good about yourself and what you are doing, there is a sense of independence - of "yes, I can do it." Some comments that typified a sense of ownership, are given below.

- "I feel good about what I am doing."
- "I thought things (literacy activities) were set in stone. Now I can just judge what my child can do."
- "I appreciate having this program brought into our lives. I wish I knew what I could have done when my other children were younger."
- "It is not really a program you know. It is just a way of altering (re-shaping) your life in which you have control."
- "It is refreshing to know we are respected for what we know. When (the facilitator) said that we know more than anyone else how our child grows and develops I felt like clapping. Who does know more than the parent about a child?"

Category 4: Understanding the Organization and Structure of the Program. This category emphasizes the importance of a family literacy program having meaningful content/format within a cohesive framework of structure. This category clearly differentiated parents who tended to provide an overall enriching experience for their children from those who did not. As indicated earlier, the PRINTS Program is organized around Steps and Roles. The Steps parallel the various aspects of a child's life in which literacy development may occur. Roles suggest the parts that parents as players take with respect to fostering their children's literacy development. Various activities fit within the Steps and for the implementation of which, the parents took various Roles. Parents who understood the larger framework were much more likely to interact with their children in a more insightful, supportive way, were likely to draw on related materials and experiences in moving the experience to conclusion, and were in more control in monitoring what a successful literacy experience would look like. Parents without this greater understanding saw the program not as a program but as a

"lot of activities". These were then used with the children in a hit or miss manner. Sometimes it just happened they provided a meaningful experience in which there was closure to the children's learning; other times, it was merely being involved without strategy. This lack of understanding of the overall structure and organization of the PRINTS Program was also exemplified by other literacy providers (community workers, school personnel) who were superficially aware of the PRINTS Program and felt they could "borrow" activities (in spite of copyright) to use in their settings without any understanding of the context for which they were developed and in which they were designed to have the greatest impact. Parents who understood the "whole" made comments like:

- "I liked how it all went together - the sequence, routine, and flexibility."
- "I became aware that an activity is more than just going through the activity. As a parent I must take five ROLES if I am going to do the best for my child".
- "When ___ (the facilitator) first introduced Steps, I did not know what she was talking about. Then as I saw her build each Step, one after the other as we moved through the program, I knew that these meant something and activities are not just a jumble but relate to different parts of a child's life."
- "I had a job getting into the swing of roles first. I would just do like I always did - just start my child and go from there. Now I was saying to myself, 'Whoa! Are you doing this? Are you forgetting this?' You know I kept forgetting to give my child positive feedback - sorry isn't it. But now I know there is a bigger picture that I must keep seeing."
- "Steps are not just a gimmick for understanding the program. They are the opportunities in my child's life for literacy related activities."
- "I could see and feel the STEPS as they showed how my child moved through different parts of life where literacy can be supported. Almost anything in life can be turned into a literacy learning experience. A walk around town is a real learning experience. 'Do you see that?' What does that say?' And of course, sometimes my child will say, Mom, do you see a T?' You don't have to be at a desk to learn."

Category 5: Knowing How to Access and Utilize Materials and Resources. There is an old expression, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Likewise, you cannot make successful literacy learning experiences out of an impoverished source of materials, books, etc. Many of the communities/centres in which the program operated did not have access to school or public libraries. The participants were often low-income (social assistance) and did not have much money to purchase literacy materials. In one sense their actions contradicted the silk purse-sow's ear expression. The program focusses on utilizing low-cost materials, so that many word games, activities, prompts, cues, models, came from sales flyers, magazines, newspaper, wrappers, etc. A lot depended on the parents' creativity and ingenuity. As one parent exclaimed on one occasion, "I will never throw away a flyer again." Supplied with a kit of bristol board, glue, scotch tape, etc., they were able to make a vast array of interesting literacy activities. A recreational reading book was given to parents at the end of each session for their children. This was very significant for the parents. It was almost like a reward for attending the sessions. It was a book they would not likely have otherwise. It was a motivator for the children. In the case of low-income families, it was a bonus. As one parent said, "We get many handouts. Don't get me wrong. We really appreciate them as we must make ends meet. We have a few books that have been donated to our centre. But when I bring home a book from the PRINTS Program, a book that is brand new, that no one else used, and it is ____'s very own, you should see the look on her face." Parents bringing home materials (books or self-constructed activities) from the program became the connecting point between the program and children. The word PRINTS

became a household word with the young children, and almost all parents told of their children asking as soon as they got home, "What did you bring from PRINTS?" Some comments illustrating this category are:

- "You know you can't get children excited on nothing. There must be interesting books and materials for them."
- "You must have sufficient materials and resources."
- "You become aware that you don't need high cost materials, that many materials are available in the home, for example, flyers."
- "You must make use of everything you can."
- "There is little sense in getting involved if you can't find books and other materials."

Category 6: Developing Sensitivity to Children's Characteristics and Needs. The PRINTS Program provides opportunity for parents to share experiences in their and their children's lives. Many parents felt that they were alone in facing a particular problem or situation with regard to the learning of their children. They felt that they were involved in a situation that was unique to them, and they felt they were not doing a very good job. Some children were developing slower than expected, were not interested in literacy type activities, were inattentive, and did not seem to have very much knowledge about basic literacy/learning tasks. As parents later said, they felt ashamed that their children were not learning well. They had felt that they were inadequate as parents. Then as parents shared, the world of their children broadened. They saw their children not as isolates, but as members of a class exemplifying "children-ness" characteristics. They were no longer ashamed, upset or frustrated.

They had a broader perspective on children and learning and often benefited from suggestions that other parents made on how to approach this situation. They were more confident and empowered to address the situation. Their comments reflected these feelings.

- "I really thought I was the only one that this was a problem for."
- "It was such a load off my mind to know that other parents were also being frustrated with their children at times."
- "All of a sudden I understood my child a lot better. I wasn't a bad Mom. I just had to deal with a more challenging situation and patience and love will go a long way."
- "I felt so much better. ___ is only young yet. I will make sure I won't push. But I will be there for him."

Conclusion

The whole is more than the sum of its parts!

Effective family literacy programs are not gimmicks. They must be well planned and well thought through frameworks of learning and experiences which change or reinforce positive attitudes about children and literacy learning, are applicable to all aspects of a child's life, provide parents with a sense of ownership, inform parents how to access and utilize materials and resources, and encourage sensitivity to children's characteristics and needs.

Family literacy programs are not just about one group of participants. They are about all the participants who are involved at different points along the chain of learning. To understand whether a family literacy program works is to understand how one group of participants impacts on another.

Knowing that the whole of a family literacy program is more than the sum of its parts and knowing the participants and factors that make up the whole, give coordinators and parent facilitators a better understanding of how to capitalize on a holistic approach in facilitating and evaluating family literacy programs.

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